

THANKS TO ODELL INSPIRATION

Burma Tickles All the Nation

By GEORGE HELICKSON
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Burma-Vita Co., 2318 Chestnut avenue, which jingled its way into the nation's conscience, is up to its old tricks again. Motorists, returning to the open highway in increasing numbers, are finding the company's rhyming signs there ahead of them.

Forty thousand of the signs line the nation's major highways today.

Near railroad crossings they read:

"Remember This If You'd Be Spared; Trains Don't Whistle Because They're Scared—Burma Shave."

Approaching a rural school, motorists are advised:

"Past Schoolhouses Take It Slow; Let the Little Shavers Grow."

On hills they're warned:

"Hardly a Driver Is Now Alive Who Passes On Hills at 75."

The company takes its safety jingles seriously.

But it doesn't take itself seriously and never has since its first signs went up near Albert Lea in 1926. The first signs didn't rhyme. They read:

"Cheer up, Face, The War Is Over."

Clinton Odell, president of the company, admits he and his two sons, Allan and Leonard, vice presidents, were so naive about advertising they didn't know it couldn't be done that way. Being novices, they learned, sometimes has its advantages.

The elder Odell was a sick insurance man whose physician advised him to get into some other line. Allan and Leonard were just out of college. Associated with them was a chemist befriended by Odell because he, too, was sick.

'IT WOULDN'T SHAVE'

They didn't even know what fast competitive company they were choosing in getting into the shaving cream business.

It was in 1925 that the chemist, Carl Noren, now a company director, whipped up the first batch

of shaving cream. It was the first of some 2,000 experimental batches and, says Odell, "a nice cream that wouldn't shave."

"No. 153" among the experiments became the present Burma-Shave—with only slight changes—when its qualities were discovered by the elder Odell on a trip to Iowa.

He'd forgotten to take shaving cream with him. His traveling companion, Carl Von Rohr, secretary-treasurer of the company until his death in 1933, happened to have "153" with him. Enough for one last shave remained in the jar.

Odell used it and recognized in it the future Burma-Shave. The two returned to Minneapolis immediately and went into production.

The product's name, Burma-Shave, was an adaption of the name of a liniment, Burma-Vita, which the firm had made previously; "Burma" for the country from which several ingredients of the product came, and "vita," Latin for life or vigor.

SON HITS THE ROAD

It was still just another shaving cream, however, until Allan Odell prevailed upon his father to give him \$200 to try out the signs.

He bought second-hand lumber, wrote the "cheer up face" line and drove out in a pick-up truck to set up the signs. Then he went into Albert Lea and proceeded to sell the druggists there a bill of goods.

"We knew we had it when the repeat orders started coming in from Albert Lea," Clinton Odell recounted.

But the firm's bank didn't know the firm had "it." Odell had to look around for new financing. Friends were skeptical. Experienced advertising men said the roadside signs couldn't possibly succeed.

How wrong their advice was is



'RHYME AND REASON' SELL SHAVING CREAM—The Odells' business philosophy is that if "you've read the rhyme you'll try the reason: Burma-Shave." Left to right, shown studying new contributions for the rhyming road signs, are Leonard, sales manager; Clinton, president, and Allan, advertising manager. For 20 jingles selected annually out of thousands of poets' contributions they pay \$100 each.

shown in a wholesale volume of business this year totaling \$1,200,000. Only shortages of fats and oils prevent the figure from being much higher.

COMEDIANS HELP

The rhyming signs backed up by a good product did it, the Odells are convinced. First year sales were \$25,000. They jumped to \$165,000 in 1927, when Allan Odell organized the initial advertising campaign. With the signs

came a lot of free advertising as the jingles caught on with comedians and publications.

During the war expansion of the use of signs was held to a minimum but those that were placed carried timely messages.

For instance:

Buying War Bonds Means Money Lent, So They Don't Cost You One Red Cent."

One of them was prophetic:

"Let's Make Hitler And Hirohito Look As Sick As Old Benito—Buy War Bonds."

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It was put up some months before Mussolini's fall.

"We don't take ourselves seriously here," said Clinton Odell. "We never ask anyone to buy. We joke and make friends. There is more to being in business than making money and that's having fun doing it."

Although the company has had numerous offers to sell to eastern interests, Odell insists "Our reply is 'not for sale.' This is a family outfit and a Minneapolis outfit and it is going to stay right here."

The Odells believe the company had three "lucky breaks:" the first, when Clinton Odell discovered "153" was "it;" the second, when Allan Odell conceived and executed the rhyming sign idea; and the third, when the company went ahead with plans for its new home in 1940. It formerly was housed in a building it had outgrown at 2019 E. Lake street.

It is a lucky manufacturer who has a site as pleasant and practical as Burma-Vita Co. The president's office looks out over Bassett's creek.

SITE PROVES LUCKY

Purchased in 1932, the site was exempted when the city subsequently took the land along the creek for a park. A good job of landscaping and long, low styling of the building make it fit into its surroundings. Outside of the industrial zone, it nevertheless has railroad trackage at its back door. The dust-free neighborhood is ideal for cosmetics manufacturing.